

I introduce to you one who we all respect and admire from afar. He is the Apostle Paul. A 100 percent treasure to the church, but also 100 percent human. He faced challenges, defeats, temptations, and battled his weaknesses. He describes himself in his letters as the worst of all sinners (1 Tim 1:15), the least of all of God's people (Ephesians 3:8), and the least of all the apostles (1 Cor. 15:9).

So who was Paul? Steven Miller wrote a memorable article for Christianity Today about Paul, and he titled his article, "Bald, Blind & Single?" Miller discovered that there was only one ancient writing that gave any sort of physical description of Paul. He wrote about an ancient book written in the second century titled Acts of Paul, which was written just a generation after Paul died. It described Paul as,

**A man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart; he had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long.**

One thing I love about Paul is that he was self-aware. He included these words in his inspired letter to the Corinthians: For some say, "*His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing*" (2 Cor. 10:10).

Paul had a past. And maybe that's another reason we love Paul because we also have a past. Before Paul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus, He had a reputation as a violent, hateful, and arrogant man. A man who needed to be broken down and then rebuilt by God himself into a man of peace, love, and humility. God broke down Paul and rebuilt him into something beautiful.

We kick off a series titled, *The Beauty of Brokenness*. I hope you will see that there is hope for you to become something beautiful through the power of God. When we are introduced to Christ, when we believe and accept his good news of salvation and follow him, we too can reveal a beauty out of brokenness that can only come from a mighty work of God. Followers of Christ reveal a beauty out of brokenness.

So we begin a verse-by-verse study through Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. A second letter means there was a first letter to the Corinthians, which tells you that the Corinthian church didn't get it right the first time. Let me give you a little background information on our letter.

Paul was a church planter. He made three missionary journeys recorded in the book of Acts. His journeys were challenging as he

went over rugged land, sailed through storms in rickety boats, and planted churches in places with familiar names. Names such as Galatia, Thessalonica, Philippi, Ephesus, and of course, Corinth.

Corinth was a city in southern Greece located on a narrow strip of land only about three miles wide between two bodies of water, the Adriatic Sea to the west and the Aegean Sea to the east. Corinth was a port city at the center of a busy trade route. It was cosmopolitan, and people came there to make their fortunes. It was full of people from all over—Hellenistic Greeks, Romans, Syrians, and Jews. It was a worldly place, and any sin one could imagine was tolerated. The city was full of temples dedicated to pagan deities like Aphrodite, Apollo, or Zeus.

Paul first arrived in Corinth with his friends Silas and Timothy on his second missionary journey and began preaching about Jesus in 50 AD. He soon met a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who heard the good news of Jesus from Paul and came to faith. Paul supported himself by making tents during the week and preaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath to both Jews and Greeks. Soon a little church of Jewish and Gentile converts was born. The little church in Corinth grew, and as it grew, so did the persecution against Paul by the local leaders in the city. After about a little over a year, Paul left Corinth and set sail to Ephesus and then back to his home church in Antioch.

After resting up in Antioch, Paul set off again in what we know as Paul's third missionary journey. So Paul makes his way back to Ephesus. He spent three years there, and it was there he wrote 1 Corinthians. Paul then continued his journey, hoping to encourage churches, and soon he caught wind that the letter he wrote wasn't well received in Corinth. His letter didn't change their hearts.

Imagine how Paul felt. He gave himself totally to his ministry to the Corinthians, and many of those in the church continued in their sin, even flaunting it in public. Paul called out their sin, called them to repent, pled for unity, for purity, he spoke about marriage, worship, women in leadership, gifts, and money. The famous church planter must have felt like he had failed God.

Paul continued his journey and headed to Macedonia, when he got to Troas, he waited to hear more about the state of the Corinthian church. Eventually, a young man named Titus arrived and shared that things were still not good in Corinth.

Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians that he wrote another very short letter between first and second Corinthians. We have no record of that letter. He just said in 2 Corinthians that he wrote it out of great distress. The ministry was hard for Paul.

So Paul writes another longer letter, what we know as Paul's second letter. What are some major themes we will see in the next few weeks?

### **Paul defends the credibility of his ministry**

Paul wrote to defend himself and his ministry from the attacks of his enemies. Paul's opponents claimed to be the true apostles, and they challenged Paul's credentials as an Apostle. They saw his weaknesses to be signs that God was not with him. I believe Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from a place of pain. And if you can relate to a place of pain, this letter is for you. Imagine being discredited because of your looks, your ability to speak, your particular struggle, or your lack of worldly success. Paul has a lot to say to you in this letter.

### **Paul tells the Corinthians to be reconciled to God, to him, and one another**

There was division between Paul and the church but also between those within the church family. We will see from his posture of humility; Paul encouraged the church to be reconciled to him, to God, and each other. As the one who was wounded, Paul made the first move to show them grace. And that should encourage us. If our posture is humility, God showers us with grace when we sin and when we are sinned against. That's a promise.

### **Paul reminds them about their responsibility to be generous**

Remember, they were rich. Churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece were donating from their meager supplies to the poorer churches. Paul was especially concerned about the struggling little church in Jerusalem, the center of it all. In the mid-first century, the area surrounding Jerusalem was suffering the effects of drought. Christians in Jerusalem were starving, and the Christians in Corinth had forgotten about the Christian virtue of generosity.

### **Paul challenges them to follow Christ as he follows Christ.**

Paul called on them to repent, follow Christ, and follow leaders who imitated Christ. He wanted them to know that God loved them so much that he would meet them in their brokenness and reveal through them the beauty that comes when God restores someone from brokenness and rebuilds them. Paul's own life illustrates this. So for us, if God will restore Paul from brokenness, we can trust that he will restore any of us.

The passage for this message is only two verses. It's a greeting. There is nothing unusual about his greeting. The words he uses are familiar and similar to other greetings found in his other letters. His letter starts this way. *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother," (v. 1a).*

Not every leader in the early church got the title apostle. Paul didn't ask for it. He didn't self appoint himself to the title. Paul was given this title, given this special calling by God himself.

### **Paul's call from God reveals beauty out of brokenness**

Paul refers to his title apostle as being something given by Jesus Christ himself at the moment of his conversion on the road to Damascus. He connects his present calling to his past conversion experience.

The term, apostle, speaks to authority as one who is sent like a diplomat to represent his leader, his king. God gave Paul his authority. Notice Paul purposely distinguishes himself from his friend, his "spiritual brother," Timothy. So what makes an apostle different from any other committed follower of Jesus Christ?

New Testament teaching shows that to receive the title of apostle, three specific criteria needed to be true. Apostles had to have seen the risen Jesus firsthand. Not just be with Jesus before his death, but see Jesus after his resurrection when he reappeared to many before he went to heaven. Apostles had to be directly appointed to the position by Jesus himself. There would be a direct undeniable calling from Jesus to a specific role. Apostles were given the power from God to perform miraculous signs and wonders. These signs and wonders would validate their calling, validate their message, inspired writings, and authority in the early church.

Paul planted the church in Corinth with signs and wonders, but the people still questioned his calling. There is a fascinating exchange that happens between Paul and the church over this issue. Remember, Paul wasn't impressive in terms of what the world ranked as impressive. Paul was plain, poor, and couldn't speak well. They looked at Paul, and were not impressed. Paul didn't dazzle them. And while Paul was away, false teachers invaded the church, and they dazzled the Corinthians. They were smooth talkers and rich. Paul sarcastically refers to these false teachers as Super-Apostles. Check out Paul's words from 2 Corinthians 12.

**I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even as I am nothing. I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs and wonders. vv. 11-12**

May we not judge our leaders by how they look or how well they speak, but on how they handle the Word of God, and if they lead with integrity, character, and humility.

### **So what is Paul's faith story?**

Before Christ broke him down and rebuilt him, Paul had a prior career and another name. He was known and feared as Saul from Tarsus. He was a Pharisee, a Jewish leader, and well educated in the law. He probably had, what we know as the Old Testament, memorized. His job was to persecute those who followed Jesus. He was to arrest or intimidate Christians.

Acts 8 tells us Paul approved the execution of Stephen. Stephen was stoned to death because he was a follower of Jesus who bravely shared the good news of Jesus with others. In Acts 9, we read Paul was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, Syria, to arrest followers of Jesus. Here is what happened when he approached Damascus that day.

**As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."**

**The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. Acts 9:3-9**

The risen Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus and changed his life. Then the Lord spoke to a follower of Jesus named Ananias in a vision and told him to go to Saul and lay hands on him, and he would regain his sight. But Ananias had heard about Saul's reputation and fearing for his life; he was afraid to go and help him. Then the Lord said this to Ananias about the calling of Paul.

**But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Acts 9:15-16**

Paul was broken, and rebuilt to fulfill God's calling to preach to Jews and Gentiles. And this grand calling included a path of sacrifice and suffering so that the beauty of God's glory would be revealed through this plain little man. A man who now understood for the first time, God's love, mercy, and grace.

Do you believe you have a calling? Or do you doubt? Do you view yourself as too weak, lazy, or sinful to be useful for any good thing? If you don't believe you have a calling to be useful to God, you believe a lie. God has a calling for each one of us if we open our hearts to listen and obey on faith. You may stumble. It may be hard. People may doubt you. But if any of that is true, you are in good company. You are like Paul.

Only an encounter with Jesus can transform a person from selfish to selfless, from evil to good, from arrogant to humble, from something ugly into something beautiful. Something broken into something repaired, restored, and useful.

Jesus said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Paul's call wasn't cushy. It wasn't a call to be esteemed by his peers or to get rich along the way. It was to a hardscrabble life. Paul's beautiful call caused him both emotional and physical pain. Just like Jesus.

It's good we look at Paul's legacy of work. Paul was a church planter. Here is a snapshot. *"To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia:" (v. 1b).*

### **Paul's legacy also reveals beauty out of brokenness**

A legacy is what is handed down from the past. Paul left us an incredible legacy that reveals beauty. It takes a grace-filled man to call these people who turned on him holy people. But Paul himself experienced God's grace. Yes, they were each a work in process. And so are we. In a few weeks, we will hear that these "holy people" had the nerve to ask Paul to give them letters of recommendation before they would take his letter seriously.

I could see Paul saying, "Seriously? I planted your church. I did it with signs and wonders, and you are asking for letters of reference?" Here is how Paul responded. He didn't send them letters of reference. He wrote:

**You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. 2 Cor. 3:2-3**

Paul is saying, "You are my opus. You are my legacy. You are evidence of my ministry. The letter you ask for is written by the Holy Spirit in a new way in your heart. Wake Up! Don't be deceived by these super-apostles. Their teaching didn't change your heart. Be honest. Something beautiful happened in you as I fulfilled my calling."

We love Paul. We read Paul's words. We memorize them. We quote them. We seek to lead and disciple others like Paul. But there is more to Paul's legacy than one struggling church in Corinth. Remember Paul, the apostle, was 100 percent human. He got frustrated. He lashed out at the Corinthians. To paraphrase, he said this in chapter 10, "You want to follow super-apostles that measure success by worldly standards. You look at me, and you are ashamed because I am poor. You don't like that I have callouses on my hands because I work for a living. I am not pretty; I am not eloquent but look at my life. Look at my legacy. I follow Christ. I measure my success by how much I imitate Christ. Look at my life; I have nothing to hide or be ashamed of. I guess I am going to have to boast like the world boast like a fool to get your attention. Here is my legacy." (Paraphrased)

He goes on to talk about who he is and how he has suffered for Christ. And then he says, "These things, I boast. But I boast in my weakness because it's through my weakness that God is glorified, and that is a beautiful thing." (Paraphrased)

### **But here is another beautiful side to his legacy:**

He planted more churches than we can count. He wrote over a dozen New Testament letters. He formulated the fundamental doctrines of our Christian faith. He poured out his life as an

offering to his Savior and Lord. He died a martyr at the hands of Romans. Paul was obedient to follow Christ and endure unimaginable hardship and opposition, and he left us with a beautiful and inspiring legacy.

So in verse 1, we see his calling as an apostle, and we get a snapshot of his legacy of ministry; in verse 2, we see how. This verse has it all. It is the good news of God that Paul preached over and over. *"Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 2).*

Paul's news is good news because it is news of grace. Paul saw himself and sees all people as not deserving any favor from God, as broken and without hope. But on that road to Damascus, he was given God's gift of grace. And he knows God's grace changed him and made him beautiful, and he knew God's grace could change the Corinthians. God's grace can change us, but we must accept and stop trying to earn God's love, and believe in our hearts that we will never deserve God's favor.

What is it that God wants? He wants us to surrender to the truth. He wants us to throw up our hands and cry out to God for mercy and say to him, "Please take over!" And then go before him in faith and trust him to lead you.

Paul's message is a message of peace; through all the chaos and disruption, he has found peace deep in his heart. He wants these stiff-necked Corinthians to know God's peace. If you feel that you lack an understanding of grace and peace, Paul says, listen up. We won't understand God's grace and peace until we understand and accept what good thing Jesus did for you.

Paul wanted his audience to see the true gospel of Jesus. He was fighting against the false gospel of the super-apostles. He was fighting against the values of the world. His audience looked at Paul and thought, "Look at all that hardship he faced, how could God be with him?" How can humiliation and suffering be good or right?

And you know what? Why wouldn't Jesus' audience who lived by the values of the world look at what Jesus endured and say the same thing, "Look at all the hardship Jesus faced, how could God be with him? Look at what happened to him on the cross, how could God be with him?"

It's what some call "The Paradox of the Cross." The cross's paradox is that the path to glory, victory, and life comes through Jesus descending to become like us, endure the worst suffering, and be killed on a cross. The cross' paradox is this: Out of one

man's suffering comes atonement for the sins of all who believe. Out of one man's death comes life for all who believe. Out of something ugly and evil comes something righteous, just, and pure. Out of hate comes love. Out of something ugly and broken comes something beautiful.

Do we see something here? Paul could have preached the gospel with words alone, but he needed to show them the gospel with his life. The more he followed Jesus, the more his life demonstrated the paradox of the cross.

Paul said, "Jesus left the place of glory and riches, and honor and descended to death like a poor slave so that the riches of God's grace could lift up those who were slaves to sin and poverty." He wrote it, and then he imitated Christ with his own life.

Are you struggling right now with doubts? Are you struggling to believe that God's grace is meant for you? Are you discouraged because following Christ seems so hard right now? Don't think Paul didn't have those seasons too. Look at what he learned that sustained him. The Holy Spirit spoke to Paul probably when he was most despondent and said to him,

**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 2 Cor. 12:9.**

Christ's power is made perfect in our weakness. That is living the paradox of the cross. Whatever your weakness is right now. Are you broken-hearted? Tired? Sick? Afraid? Know that Jesus is with you. And be glad of this: The promise of God delivered by Paul is that the season you are in is an opportunity for Christ's power to work in your life in some powerful way to accomplish His will on earth as it is in heaven.

And God gives more grace. There is grace for every time you sin or are sinned against. There is always more grace for what is coming ahead. Because there is always more grace for God to give you, just like he did Paul, to love, forgive, confess, trust, and persevere even when things are hard. Grace and peace to you church. And Grace and Peace to each of us as we navigate what it means to live beautifully broken for Christ.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1451-1FC